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UNEMPLOYMENT AND PERSONALITY —A STUDY OF PSYCHOPATHIC CASES

By

HERMAN M. ADLER

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Formerly Chief of Staff, Boston Psychopathic Hospital

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UNEMPLOYMENT AND PERSONALITY—A STUDY OF PSYCHOPATHIC CASES

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A WORD of explanation may be required in order to make clear just why an alienist occupies himself with the subject of unemployment.

With the attention at present given this ever-growing problem it is obvious that more than a passing acquaintance with the subject is required for even an intelligent appreciation of its significance. It is not intended that this report be considered an attempt to ascertain the fundamental causes of unemployment, but rather the attempt has been made to analyze in part on the basis of their personality a selected number of persons for whom unemployment was a serious problem. The Boston Psychopathic Hospital, with its annual admission rate of about two thousand and with fifteen hundred in the out-patient department, offers an unusual opportunity for studying the extreme cases of social difficulties of many types. Among these, unemployment has appeared not infrequently. It was thought that certain results might be obtained if the careful medical and psychiatric studies of the Psychopathic Hospital patients were made use of in interpreting some of their social difficulties. The difference between studying this sort of material and the much more abundant material obtained in the employment agencies, labor headquarters, court rooms, etc., is that the Psychopathic Hospital patients are subjected to uniform and fairly searching examination, at the completion of which a very fair idea may be had of the physical and mental equipment and shortcomings of the different individuals. This study, therefore, will not lead to an understanding of the economic causes of unemployment, but it is hoped that it will help pave the way to an understanding of the kind of individual who is likely to get into economic difficulties, the particular kind of difficulty he is likely to meet with, and the sort of situations in which it will be most apt to occur. Furthermore, it must be said that only a part of the patients admitted to the Psychopathic Hospital suffer from mental diseases. A great number of patients are admitted who are suffering from feeble-mindedness, psychoneuroses or border-

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line conditions. However, all of them show the effects of fairly definite psychopathic tendencies. The study of these extreme types will often show in an exaggerated way, and, therefore, in a way that will impress the observer, difficulties of personality and of career which in a more nearly normal individual might hardly be considered significant.

The work on which the following report is based consisted of an analysis of one hundred cases of unemployment which had been received as patients in the Psychopathic Hospital. These were unselected cases so far as the diagnoses or the nature of the employment difficulties were concerned. The only selection exercised was in regard to age and sex. Only males of from twenty-five to fifty-five years of age were included. These cases were tabulated in the order in which they were received at the hospital. Each patient was subjected to the routine examinations of the Psychopathic Hospital, which consisted in a complete physical examination, a complete mental examination, a psychological examination, with intelligence tests to determine feeble-mindedness, supplemented by a history of social service investigation. The physical examination in each case included a Wassermann test of the blood, and, where that proved positive, lumbar puncture was performed. It was thought that with cases worked up thus thoroughly it might be possible to draw certain correlations with their mental condition and their employment difficulties.

It was not possible in each case to obtain the information with the degree of accuracy and detail that was often desirable; this in spite of the fact that the routine examinations are as thorough as the patient's circumstances will permit and much more thorough than is ever possible in an out-patient service. Perfection in this regard is not only difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, but perhaps even undesirable. There is great danger of amassing evidence to such an extent that one fails to see the wood for the trees. It is to be expected that a survey of one hundred cases, even if it is performed only in the brief fashion here possible, will show certain fundamental correlations. These correlations, while they may appear to be quite accidental and the result of extraneous circumstances, by their continual recurrence assume a more definite significance. Thus, for instance, one of the first distinctions it is important to make is the distinction between behavior and the reasons given by the participant for his behavior.

The legal point of view, which considers every individual responsible for his acts until proven to the contrary, is still dominating our thoughts in regard to social difficulties. Consequently, since a person is responsible, his own account of the reasons why he did a certain thing must be considered of great importance. This point of view is one which is shared also by a number of psychologists and psychiatrists. These belong, on the whole, to the group of introspective psychologists. According to their ideas an individual should always be able to give an account of the reasons for his conduct. He often may not be able to do this without much study or even assistance, but in the end he should arrive at a satisfactory, conscious explanation.

There is a great deal to be said in favor of this view. None the less, it is not the only possible solution, and has one serious disadvantage in its application to such a problem as unemployment in that the time consumed in explaining a single case and bringing into consciousness all the reasons for the conduct disturbance, if it is possible, is prohibitive. At the rate at which the best of the psychoanalysts work it would not be possible properly to study in the course of the year more than a dozen cases. Furthermore, the results of such work are of importance purely for the individual, and no generalizations can be drawn therefrom. Each person's story has to be studied by itself. Therefore, at the end of the year one has an enormous amount of detailed knowledge about a few cases, and all the other cases that might have come before the examiner for attention have to go without any assistance whatever. Also, no generalizations being possible, it is a matter of piece work; to study one hundred cases according to this method would require the efforts of fifteen to twenty psychologists on full time for many months.

It seems clear, therefore, that the only possible way to attack this problem is by the other method, namely, the psychiatric method. This method presupposes that human conduct, like conduct or behavior observed anywhere in the organic world, is dependent upon fundamental reactions. These reactions may be combined into complex forms which may baffle analysis. Above all, one should note that the fundamental concept of organic activity requires the participation of at least two forces more or less directly opposed. This opposition of forces is continuous or intermittent, and, in perfect repose, is in equilibrium. When the equilibrium is disturbed in one or the other direction, action

ensues. Thus, in our muscular system we find muscles that perform opposite functions so placed as to balance each other's pull. A member is flexed, not by the action of the flexor muscles alone, but by the increased tension of the extensor muscles. Both the flexors and the extensors are active, only the flexors are a little more active. Complete relaxation of the muscles occurs only in deepest unconsciousness. In the same way one may assume that the mental activities are more or less in equilibrium, and this applies principally to the instincts and the emotions. The emotions are associated with the conscious mind, but also more fundamentally with other functions of the body, so that an emotion may be evoked by other than psychic disturbance. The mental content will be correctly associated with this, except in complete dementia. Ordinarily, emotional impulses are well correlated with conscious mental processes, so that on the receipt of unpleasant news and in the face of a pleasant experience the corresponding emotions are experienced. On the other hand, emotional impulses may arise from causes outside of the mind, outside even of the subconscious mind in the meaning of the psychoanalytical school. Thus, for instance, one may wake up in the morning feeling depressed. This may be due to purely physical causes and need not be necessarily due to supposed complexes, as Sigmund Freud maintains. The work of Dr. Cannon at the Harvard Medical School on the rôle of the ductless glands in pain, hunger, fear and rage has shown at least one way in which this may occur. When such an emotional impulse is aroused, the whole human being resists it. He tries to free himself from it as soon as possible, and does so by many devices, such as following his routine occupations, interesting himself in his work, seeking distraction by conversation with interesting, stimulating persons; but, whatever he may do to relieve the emotional tension, he does not allow it to affect his conduct in any serious way. His inhibition, his judgment, whatever it is that he uses, is sufficient to oppose these tendencies up to a certain point. There is, however, a threshold above which he can no longer inhibit. If the stimulus is strong enough, therefore, the individual would not be able to resist. Just where this threshold or this breaking strain lies has to be determined in each individual.

Normal individuals show a certain range of variation in this respect. In fact, a single individual may at different times

show a variation, but ordinarily these variations are within comparatively narrow limits, so narrow that it has been possible to construct a huge code of laws which without great injustice fits practically all the normal members of the community. When this threshold varies, however, beyond these limits, then conduct results which is sufficiently outside of the normal limits to call for attention. It is very important, however, to realize that such variations, while they may be fundamental, congenital, and even more or less fixed, are not absolutely fixed and permanent. Were this not so, the problem of dealing with the deviates would be greatly simplified. Then it would be merely a matter of rounding them up and either executing them or at least segregating them. The difficulty in the management of delinquency is caused chiefly by the fact that individuals vary somewhat in their ability to fit into the existing community and that, therefore, an appearance is created that their misdeeds are intentional, and that the best remedy is to teach them the stern lessons of reality by making them suffer for their acts.

This method has failed all along the line, and nowhere more than in the treatment of unemployment. The corrective measures that are applied to cases of unemployment are usually methods of teaching by experience. The individual gets into difficulties and, where the authorities become interested, pains are taken to convince him, in order to prevent their recurrence, that these difficulties are the results of his own ill-judged acts. The recurrences, however, are noted and investigated and attention is gradually withdrawn from the delinquent and efforts are made to prevent his dependents or neighbors from suffering the consequences of the delinquencies. The only art, apparently, that is used in the corrective measures employed consists in tempering the severity of the reactions to the delinquent. So, while on the one hand we say to the individual, "You must not do this again because if you do you will suffer starvation and exposure and perhaps death," at the same time we temper this by preventing his dying of exposure or starvation and even by maintaining the family though inadequately, during his unemployment. Nature's remedy is to let events take their full course and to exterminate the weakling who cannot learn by experience. We have a horror of such methods and object to death as a penalty. We do not, however, sufficiently modify the rest of the treatment to make it very effective.

As a first step, therefore, in determining what could be done in the way of corrective education, it is necessary to determine the exact nature of the individual in question in regard to his ability to learn. To do this we have analyzed one hundred cases in such a way as to group all the patients under three headings. The headings indicate in a very schematic way our opinion as to their character or personality. The first of the three classifications is the *paranoid personality*. Under this heading are grouped all individuals who have shown by their conduct that their reaction to the world is entirely egocentric. No matter what they experience, no matter what they desire, their own ego is in the centre of the plot and dominates everything. This may be associated with a variety of emotional reactions so that the resulting picture is a varied one. It includes individuals who are convinced of their own ability. They are always ready to undertake new schemes, they are usually working for the betterment of the rest of the world and claim all sorts of altruistic motives, and even may be altruistic to some extent, seeking merely the satisfaction of being in the limelight. Or the emotion may be a depressed one and the individuals are contentious, surly, suspicious, claim abuse, ill-treatment, recognize no kindness that is done them, appreciate no favors, etc. This is by far the largest group in our table, comprising forty-three cases, or almost half.

The next largest group, which we call *inadequate personality*, comprises cases which show evidence in their conduct of a lack of judgment, a lack of intelligence. Under this heading are placed all cases which have been shown by the psychological tests to be defective or feeble-minded, or those suffering from a deteriorating disease other than manic-depressive insanity or the paranoid psychoses.

Finally, we have a third group, which we have called the *emotionally unstable group*. Under this heading we have included all the cases that show sufficient mental ability and judgment to satisfy the ordinary demands of life and who have no marked tendency to the egocentric attitude or to enlarge upon their own significance, accomplishments, or the jealousies of others. These include individuals who show excessive emotional reactions, who at times are buoyant beyond all reason, and while in this condition show considerable psychomotor activity. Their minds are very active, they have many new ideas, they have a marvelous

imagination, they undertake a dozen different obligations, none of which they can carry out. They tire of one thing before it is half begun and go rapidly to another. In another mood, the equivalent of a depression, the more pronounced cases may show a slowing up of the mental activity, an interference with thought, a lack of initiative, a tendency to be unhappy, a brooding disposition. This group of individuals also often exhibit violent outbursts of temper. They are extremely irascible, usually on account of some external provocation. The latter may be very slight. The reaction, however, is always extremely violent. Impulsiveness, amounting often to obsession, is frequently found in these cases. Throughout these changes, whether they are hypomaniacal or depressed, they assume an attitude toward the rest of the community which is that of more or less self-effacement and modesty. The normal individual reacts to another in a friendly fashion if he considers him modest. Every politician knows this and uses little tricks in order to show how unassuming and democratic he is. Universally detested, on the other hand, is the person who appears to be conceited and arrogant, who has an idea of self-importance. A behavioristic distinction may roughly be applied to these cases: that the paranoid personality is one with which we may sympathize, but dislike; the emotionally unstable individual, on the other hand, is one that may be extremely annoying to have about, that causes untold trouble, not to say misery, and yet that is very likable.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the emotionally unstable group contains only twenty-two cases. The inadequate group, on the other hand, contains thirty-five cases. The inadequate and paranoid together, therefore, form seventy-eight per cent of the cases studied. It is not likely that these figures represent the conditions in the community at large, possibly for the reason that in the first place an emotionally unstable individual in the hypomaniacal condition is a very useful citizen and is not likely to get into difficulties unless his trouble becomes more intense. Also, on account of the fact that these people are all very popular, their friends and acquaintances will gather about them in times of need and will by united efforts keep them "on the job." With the paranoid individual this is not so. The paranoid individual gets into difficulties and one is glad to get rid of him, if possible. Where his abilities are such that the employers do not like to let him go, the other employees sooner

or later will force them to dismiss him. Furthermore, the paranoid individual will throw up his job on his own accord where there seems no adequate reason for the step.

It is interesting to consider the reasons for the unemployment in our cases. The patient was asked to state his reason for leaving and then the employer, wherever possible, was seen and his statement was taken. While these data have not yet been completely analyzed, the following points have been made. It seems that with the paranoid individuals the reasons stated by the patient are identical with those of the employer forty-four times out of one hundred and thirty-four cases, or 33 per cent. In the cases grouped under the heading inadequate the patient's and employer's accounts agree twenty-nine times out of ninety-five cases or 31 per cent. In the emotionally unstable group the patient's and employer's reasons are the same eighteen times out of forty-nine, or 37 per cent—a percentage slightly higher than in the previous groups.

Our list of cases does not include any very young people. The ages run from twenty-five to fifty-five and show the largest number in the years between thirty-six and forty-five, as might be expected.

An analysis of the months employed per case shows the following interesting figures: The emotionally unstable group averages fifty months to each job; the inadequate group, twenty-four and seven-tenths months to each job; and the paranoid, twenty and six-tenths months to each job.

The only conclusions that we may allow ourselves at present on the basis of this material are as follows:

I. There are individuals in the community who for a variety of reasons are not able to regulate their conduct on the basis of experience. One of the difficulties that such individuals get into is unemployment. The results of their unemployment bring hardships on themselves and on their dependents.

II. While some of these individuals show defects of such a severe nature that they may be regarded as hopeless and, therefore, can be segregated, there are others in whom the deviation from the normal is not sufficient to make them incapable of supporting themselves at all times and it is unwise to segregate them and prohibitively expensive.

III. From our analysis it appears that there are two types of individuals that experience these difficulties. One type, which

is grouped under the headings of inadequate and paranoid, is afflicted with certain characteristics of personality which are not amenable to treatment. To maintain these people in the community it is necessary to modify the environment so far as possible in order to prevent, in the first place, the calling out of their peculiar reactions and, furthermore, to prevent their suffering the results of their acts; in other words, to keep a man "on the job" in spite of his personal unpopularity or inadequacy. The other type, grouped under the heading of emotionally unstable, suffers from the results of temperament. These individuals are subject to variations of temperament and the treatment of their unemployment must be guided by a knowledge of their tendencies so that environment on the one hand can be suitably influenced or chosen for them, and that the individuals themselves may be trained to counteract their impulses to some extent.

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